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PUBLIC REVIEW SOUGHT IN SPOTTED OWL STUDY

The Forest Service has released for public review and comment a draft supplement to the environmental impact statement (SEIS) for the Pacific Northwest Regional Guide. The draft supplement is the result of an administrative appeal filed by a coalition of national and Oregon environmental groups questioning the direction for spotted owl habitat management given in the Forest Service's Regional Guide, which was issued in 1984.

The draft supplement examines a broad range of alternatives for managing northern spotted owl habitat on 13 national forests located in western Oregon and Washington. Public open houses to explain the content of the SEIS will be held September 15 in Olympia, WA; September 16 in Seattle, WA; September 18 in Salem, OR; and September 22 in Grants Pass, OR. Times and specific locations will be announced locally. Comments on the SEIS should be sent to: Forest Service, Spotted Owl SEIS, Box 3623, Portland, OR 97208. The comment period closes November 17, 1986.

"We have developed and evaluated 12 alternatives for planning spotted owl habitat management on the national forests in Oregon and Washington", said James F. Torrence, Regional Forester for the Pacific Northwest Region. "Each

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alternative provides a different likelihood of maintaining the viability of spotted owls. Each also has different effects on local economies dependent on timber from the national forests. As you might expect, the alternatives that provide the highest security for spotted owls would also have the highest effects on local economies."

The alternatives range from protecting spotted owl habitats only on lands not available for timber harvest, such as wilderness areas and steep slopes or unstable soils, to protecting all existing spotted owl habitat. The former provides an estimated 1.1 million acres of habitat for the owls. The latter would involve an additional 2.6 million acres of old growth and mature forests in areas that could be available for timber production.

"The draft supplement identifies a preferred alternative that maintains a viable spotted owl population, while limiting adverse effects on local economies," said Torrence. The preferred alternative would provide at least 550 spotted owl habitat areas on national forests in the Pacific Northwest Region, with a variable amount of habitat in each area. Of the 550 total, 392 areas would be on lands which would otherwise be available for timber production.

The recommended amount of old growth habitat in each designated area is 2,200 acres, with flexibility to designate smaller or larger amounts under certain conditions. Final designation, distribution, and size of individual habitat areas would be specified in Forest Plans using the guidelines in the preferred alternative. The Forest Service estimates that implementation of

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the preferred alternative would result in designation of between 314,000 and 690,000 acres of old growth and mature forest as spotted owl habitat on lands which would otherwise be available for timber management.

"We're trying to accomplish three things in the preferred alternative," said Torrence. "First and foremost, is to maintain a viable population of spotted owls. Second, is to limit the effects of protecting spotted owl habitats on local economies. Third, is to provide managers some flexibility at the forest level to protect the areas where owls actually occur."

Under the guidelines suggested in the preferred alternative, up to 1,000 acres in each habitat area would be excluded from the inventory used to determine timber harvests. Increased efforts in monitoring and research would be conducted during the next 5 to 10 years to provide a basis for adjusting future habitat management.

Under the preferred alternative the Forest Service estimates a 5 percent reduction in timber available from the national forests during the 10-15 year planning period. The decrease would cause an estimated 5 percent reduction in returns to the Treasury and the counties.

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On August 8, 1986, the USDA Forest Service will release a Draft Supplement to the Environmental Impact Statement for the Pacific Northwest Regional Guide. The Draft Supplement evaluates 12 alternatives for Regional direction concerning habitat planning and management to maintain a viable population of northern spotted owls on the National Forests in Oregon and Washington. The alternatives differ in the amounts and locations of mature and old-growth forest that would be provided for spotted owls, and thereby for other wildlife dependent on such forests. The effects of the alternatives on viability of spotted owls and on economies in the northwest are assessed. The Forest Service's preferred alternative is identified. A 90-day period for public comment opens on August 15, 1986, and closes on November 17, 1986. All interested persons are invited to comment on the Draft Supplement by sending inquiries and comments to:

Forest Service
Spotted Owl SEIS
P. O. Box 3623
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Briefing Summary

Draft Supplement to the Environmental Impact Statement for the Pacific Northwest Regional Guide

Northern Spotted Owl Habitat Management

In October, 1984, the National Wildlife Federation and others appealed the adoption of the Pacific Northwest Regional Guide. The Guide provides standards and guidelines for resource planning on individual National Forests. The appeal alleged noncompliance with the National Environmental Policy Act and questioned the adequacy of the direction to ensure the viability of the northern spotted owl. The Department of Agriculture, in Spring 1985, instructed the Forest Service to prepare a supplement to the portions of the Environmental Impact Statement dealing with spotted owls. The Draft Supplement will be released on August 8, 1986. Public comments are encouraged to help in developing a final course of action.

The Spotted Owl as a Management Indicator Species

The northern spotted owl is a management indicator species for wildlife diversity in mature and old-growth forests of the Douglas-fir zone in the Pacific Northwest. Managing habitats for a viable population of spotted owls will provide habitat for other mature and old-growth wildlife as well. A viable population has the numbers and distribution of individuals needed to ensure the continued existence of the species in an area. Relationships exist between the amounts and locations of mature and old-growth forests in the Pacific Northwest, the diversity of associated wildlife communities, the viability of spotted owl populations, and effects on timber-based economies.

The Range of Alternatives

The Draft Supplement evaluates twelve alternatives for Regional standards and guidelines for Forest planning of spotted owl habitat management, ranging from:

- o no formal measures to protect the spotted owl (habitat would be retained in wilderness and other areas unavailable for timber management; no habitat would be designated on lands available for timber management), to
- o no reduction in existing spotted owl habitat, with plans for growth of additional stands to augment the current inventory of habitat.

The alternatives differ with respect to proposed guidance for management of three habitat factors:

1. The amount of habitat provided for each pair of spotted owls (hence the likelihood of survival and reproductive success for each pair),
2. The number of habitat areas designated on lands available for timber production (hence the capability to sustain a total number of pairs), and
3. The distance between habitats in a network of designated areas (hence the likelihood for a distribution of habitats that allows for interaction of individuals).

Analysis of the Alternatives

The twelve alternatives, A through L, were evaluated using information from research, inventory, monitoring, and management experience obtained since the early 1980's, when the original Regional Guide was prepared. In addition, new methods were used to evaluate population viability and economics. Viability assessments were based on how well each alternative would provide the owl population with security from the negative effects of local catastrophes, random fluctuations in birth and death rates, and erosion of genetic variation. Two major factors in the viability analysis were the capability of habitat to support pairs of owls, and the distribution of habitat. Timber and economic assessments addressed the potential amounts of timber available for harvest, timber-related employment, and revenues to the Treasury and counties under each alternative.

Effects on Spotted Owls

As mature and old-growth forests are harvested and replaced by younger age forests, the capability to sustain pairs of spotted owls declines and the locations where they exist become increasingly isolated from one another. Populations that are fragmented into small numbers of individuals are vulnerable to extinction due to local catastrophes, random fluctuations in births and deaths, and loss of genetic variation.

Habitat throughout the National Forests in Oregon and Washington is currently estimated to be capable of sustaining about 1,250 pairs of spotted owls. Under Alternatives A and B, which rely heavily on habitat in wilderness and other areas unavailable for timber production, habitats would become fragmented and populations would decline rapidly. There would be a very low likelihood of sustaining viable populations on a long-term basis.

Under Alternative L, which retains all existing suitable habitat, populations would not be reduced significantly over time, and there would be a high likelihood of sustaining viable populations barring major, unforeseen catastrophes.

Intermediate alternatives, if carried out over a long period of time, would reduce habitat and thus population size by varying amounts from the current level. Without adaptive management, this could result in a very low to moderate likelihood of sustaining a viable population on a long-term basis.

Effects on Timber-based Economies

Under Alternatives A and B, which rely entirely or primarily on habitat in wilderness and other sites that are unavailable for timber production, an estimated 3.8 billion board feet of timber could be available annually during the 10-15 year planning period from the 13 National Forests with spotted owl habitat. This would have little or no direct effect on the estimated 82,500 current jobs in forest products industries in the Pacific Northwest. Returns to the Treasury and counties from these 13 National Forests would remain at the annual average of \$596 million.

Under intermediate alternatives, the estimated amount of timber available for sale annually from the 13 Forests ranges from approximately 3.75 billion board feet (Alternative C, the "no action" alternative) to 2.56 billion board feet (Alternative K) during the planning period.

Compared to Alternative A, the estimated reduction in jobs under these alternatives ranges from 50 to as many as 8,700, and the estimated total annual returns to the Treasury and counties would be reduced by \$28 to \$211 million.

Under Alternative L, which maintains all existing spotted owl habitat plus some additional areas capable of growing into suitable habitat, the annual amount of timber available for sale would approach 2.0 billion board feet during the planning period. This would result in an estimated 7,215 to 12,630 fewer jobs in timber-related industries as compared with Alternative A. Estimated total annual revenues to the Treasury and counties would be approximately \$270 to \$310 million lower than under Alternative A.

The effects of spotted owl habitat management on timber-based economies would be greatest in rural areas where local economies are highly dependent on processing timber from the National Forests.

The Forest Service's Preferred Alternative

Based on the analysis of available information, the Forest Service proposes Alternative F as the preferred alternative. Alternative F is designed to ensure long-term viability for spotted owls while also maintaining a healthy timber economy. Approximately 550 habitat areas would be designated for spotted owls on the National Forests in the Pacific Northwest Region. The recommended amount of mature and old-growth habitat in each designated area is 2,200 acres, with flexibility to designate smaller or larger amounts under certain conditions. Of the 550 habitat areas, approximately 390 would be designated on lands available (in technical terms, "tentatively suitable") for timber production. The remainder would be designated in wilderness areas and other sites unavailable for timber production; these areas ensure a distribution of habitats to prevent isolation of spotted owl pairs. Spotted owl habitat will also occur outside of the designated areas. Habitat capability to support pairs in these "nondesignated" habitats would be high initially, and lower as timber harvest and stand regeneration replace mature and old growth stands with younger age forests.

Based on the viability analysis, the total habitat provided on National Forests in the Pacific Northwest Region would be capable of supporting about 950 pairs in 15 years under Alternative F. Continuity of spotted owls in the Region with populations on other lands would be maintained through a habitat network based on criteria for distances between designated habitat areas. An estimated 314,000 to 690,000 acres of mature and old-growth forest would be designated in habitat areas on National Forest lands available for timber management.

With implementation of Alternative F, habitat remaining at the end of the 10-15 year planning period would be capable of supporting an estimated 1,250 pairs of northern spotted owls on all Federal ownerships in Washington, Oregon, and northern California into the late 21st century. Together with the estimated habitat capability to support 300 to 400 pairs on all Federal ownerships in the Sierra Nevada of California, the option remains at the end of the 10 to 15 year planning period to sustain over 1,500 pairs throughout the range of the northern and California subspecies of spotted owls.

At the end of the 10-15 year plan period, monitoring and research data would be used to adjust management, if necessary, to ensure maintenance of a viable population.

Alternative F gives priority for designation of habitat areas to sites occupied by pairs of owls, followed by areas known to be used by individual owls. Of the 550 designated habitat areas, as many as possible would be located on lands unavailable for timber harvest. Up to 1,000 acres of spotted owl habitat within each area would be excluded from the inventory used in calculating the allowable sale quantity for timber. The amount of habitat designated in excess of 1,000 acres would be protected from harvest during the 10-15 year planning period, but would be included in calculating the allowable sale quantity. This would reduce economic impacts during the plan period.

Alternative F would provide for an annual harvest of 3.6 billion board feet of timber on the 13 National Forests with spotted owl habitat. This is 5 percent less than Alternative A, which does not designate any sites for spotted owl habitat on lands available for timber production. Approximately 750 to 1,300 fewer timber-related jobs would result as compared to Alternative A. Total annual returns to the Treasury and counties would be reduced by approximately \$28 to \$32 million.

Future Planning and Adaptive Management

Planning direction will be reassessed at the end of the 10 to 15 year planning period to ensure a viable population. By adapting management at that time and at the beginning of subsequent planning periods, spotted owl habitat remaining at that time could be retained or reduced for future periods. Knowledge upon which to base these adjustments must come from management experience, monitoring, and research conducted over the next 10 to 15 years.

Questions and Answers Concerning the
Draft Supplement to the Environmental Impact Statement
for the Pacific Northwest Region Guide

1. When do you expect to make a final decision on the supplemental EIS?

Answer: The 90-day public comment period on the Draft Supplement to the Environmental Impact Statement is scheduled to end on November 17, 1986. Because of the high interest in this issue, we anticipate numerous and detailed comments. We will conduct a thorough analysis of all comments to help identify appropriate changes in the SEIS. This process will be completed, and a final decision reached, sometime after the first of the year.

2. How does the preferred alternative compare with recommendations by the National Audubon Society's panel of scientists who reviewed information on the spotted owl?

Answer: The preferred alternative and the Audubon panel recommendations are similar with respect to population levels and habitat distribution. The panel recommended maintaining a population of at least 1,500 pairs of spotted owls on all lands throughout their range in Washington, Oregon, Northern California, and the Sierra Nevadas. Our analysis indicates that with implementation of the preferred alternative, the available habitat should be capable of supporting more than 2,000 pairs at the end of the first planning period (about 15 years from now) in the area described by the Audubon panel. We further estimate that habitat capability may be less than 1,500 pairs past the 10-15 year planning period if the proposed management is continued and assumptions of the analysis are unchanged. However, at the end planning period we will review Forest Plans to incorporate new information related to any changes in management practices that may be necessary to ensure viability of the spotted owl.

With respect to distribution, the panel supported the habitat network system developed by the Forest Service and cooperating agencies.

With regard to habitat area size, the panel recommended 4,500 acres of old-growth forest for habitat areas in Washington, and 2,500 acres of old-growth forest for areas in Oregon. The preferred alternative recommends 2,200 acres as the Regional guide for designating spotted owl habitat areas. The alternative calls for flexibility to designate a larger or smaller number of acres depending on factors such as local variations in habitat quality. Thus, the flexibility provided in the preferred alternative would allow for designation of areas larger than 2,200 acres when necessary to ensure that enough suitable habitat is retained to sustain a pair of spotted owls. We believe this approach is preferable to a rigid application of a uniform standard that would not take site-specific variability into account.

3. Why was 2,200 acres selected as the recommended amount of old-growth and mature forest in spotted owl habitat areas?

Answer: The 2,200 acre recommendation is based on radio telemetry data. It is the average amount of old-growth and mature forest land in the annual home range of spotted owl pairs that had been reported in Oregon.

In addition to the data from Oregon, we also considered radio-telemetry data on the average annual home ranges of three pairs of spotted owls studied in Washington. Their home ranges contained an average of 4,200 acres of old-growth and mature forest. The preferred alternative provides the flexibility to designate more than 2,200 acres, which may be necessary for some pairs in the northern distribution of the subspecies.

4. The preferred alternative recommends 2,200 acres of old growth and mature forest within 2.1 miles of a nest site, with flexibility to designate a larger or smaller amount under certain circumstances. How will the Forest Service decide whether a larger or smaller amount of habitat is appropriate?

Answer: The Draft Supplement to the EIS contains criteria for determining the amount of suitable habitat to designate in spotted owl habitat areas. Briefly, the size of each area will be determined on the basis of site specific information.

The amount of suitable habitat within a designated area may exceed 2,200 acres where: habitat is of low quality (hence, more would be needed to support a pair); where needed to prevent habitat loss from catastrophic events, or there are physical barriers to the dispersal of owls beyond the designated habitat area, such as broad expanses of unsuitable habitat; or where such designation is consistent with achieving multiple-use objectives.

The amount of suitable habitat within a designated area may be less than 2,200 acres where: an area with less than that amount of suitable habitat has had verified occupancy by a pair within the previous two years and the amount and quality of suitable habitat within the pair's home range (about a two mile radius from the nest) has not declined significantly during those years. The amount designated may also be less than 2,200 acres where habitat is of higher than average quality, or when there is currently insufficient suitable habitat to provide 2,200 acres within a 2.1 mile radius of the nest.

5. What are the recommended distances between designated areas in the habitat network under the preferred alternative? What is the basis for these recommendations?

Answer: Alternative F recommends that single designated habitat areas be generally no more than 6 miles apart. Habitat areas may also be designated in clusters of three; the clusters should be within approximately 12 miles of each other. Exceptions to these distances will be permitted. For example, an area occupied by a pair that is 6.2 miles from the nearest designated area could be included in the network.

The recommended distances are based on our knowledge of movements by adult spotted owls and dispersing juveniles. The intent of the habitat network is to provide for interaction of spotted owls throughout the population. This will limit risks to viability that might result from local extinctions that could occur if pairs become isolated.

6. How much of the National Forest land in the Pacific Northwest Region is within the range of the northern spotted owl? How much of their habitat coincides with land tentatively suitable for timber production?

Answer: Of the 19 National Forests within the Pacific Northwest Region, 13 are within the range of the northern spotted owl. These 13 Forests cover 13.7 million acres, which includes approximately 3.6 million acres of suitable habitat for the owl. Roughly two-thirds of the suitable habitat, or 2.5 million acres, coincides with lands also considered tentatively suitable for timber production. The remaining 1.1 million acres of suitable habitat are in areas unsuitable for timber production or are reserved for other purposes, such as wilderness.

7. What are the characteristics of suitable habitat for northern spotted owls?

Answer: Suitable habitat consists of stands of old-growth or mature trees. Spotted owls have been reported in almost all of the major types of coniferous forests in the Pacific Northwest. Many researchers consider the northern spotted owl to be most closely associated with old-growth and mature Douglas-fir forests. Some of these forests contain a mix of other conifers such as grand fir, hemlock, cedar, and ponderosa pine. The particular species or group of species constituting habitat for owls in a given location varies from south to north, from the east to the west side of the Cascades, and with elevation. Characteristics of suitable habitat include forests with a well-developed stratification of overstory, midstory, and understory vegetation; the presence of large trees with broken tops and cavities for nesting; and the presence of snags, decaying logs, and debris on the forest floor.

To date, studies of spotted owls have shown a significant preference for foraging and nesting in unlogged old-growth and mature forests. Use of second growth for foraging does occur, but is variable. Also, the use of second growth areas often is less than what would be expected if the owls showed an equal preference for all areas. Juvenile spotted owls have shown less of a preference for mature and old-growth forests than have adult spotted owls.

8. What is the effect of the preferred alternative on the timber volume offered for sale on the 13 National Forests with spotted owl habitat in the Pacific Northwest Region?

Answer: Under the preferred alternative, we estimate the timber volume offered for sale on these 13 National Forests could be approximately 3.6 billion board feet. This is about 200 million board feet (5%) less than could be offered for sale if no formal measures were adopted to protect the spotted owl. It should be noted that these figures assume there will be no other non-timber allocations of land, such as roadless recreation areas.

9. What is the effect of the preferred alternative on employment in the Pacific Northwest Region?

Answer: Compared to providing no formal protection for spotted owls, the preferred alternative may result in an estimated reduction of 750 to 1300 jobs in the Region during the 10-15 year planning period. This would be a 1-2% reduction from the estimated 82,500 current jobs in forest products industries in the Pacific Northwest.

